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ABSTRACT

As veterans of several years' graduate training and teaching assistantships in Writing Programs, new degree holders entering the academic job market may assume they have an understanding, or at least an awareness, of audience and of discourse convention. But when it comes to their own job applications, they may be overlooking some of the very elements with which they should be most familiar. Here are some hints for those applying for composition and rhetoric positions at two-year institutions. First, the curriculum vita and application letter should indicate clearly how the applicant's specialization and experience fit the job description. Addenda and qualifiers can be added after the applicant has established his or her eligibility for the position. Second, application materials should be arranged in logical, easy-to-read blocks of information. Each document should work for the applicant; redundancy wastes space that could be used to demonstrate credibility with the institution and the position. Third, terms the applicant uses and terms used in the position announcement should be clarified. For instance, rather than writing "ABD," write, "I have finished my coursework and am presently completing my dissertation." Fourth, the applicant should go beyond his or her present job description and show his or her individual one-of-a-kind contributions to each position listed in the resume. (TB)

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So You Want to Teach at the Two-Year College: The Application Process

by Cheryl Reed, San Diego Mesa College

As veterans of several years' graduate training and teaching assistantships in Writing Programs, new degree holders entering the academic job market may assume they have an understanding, or at least an awareness, of audience and of discourse convention. But when it comes to their own job applications, they may be overlooking some of the very elements with which they should be most familiar. The following is a quick look at the rhetorical situation posed by the two-year college application process. Because this is a composite picture gleaned from application reviews and discussions with search committees in two-year institutions in several states, you may find that some of the procedures described below do not apply in a specific case.

The way you compose yourself on paper affects the way your job applications are physically handled and the way your experience and training gets interpreted institutionally. If you want to make your graduate experience "industrial strength"--that is, able to negotiate the bureaucratic side of the application process successfully--take a cue from business theory. Consider the paper trail your application creates and make sure it clearly communicates your intended message at every point.

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On the two-year college job market, the very first (and the very last) person who handles your application packet is most likely not the Search Committee Chair. Rather, it's probably opened and sorted by a departmental staffperson and/or funnelled through the Human Resources Office. The person who initially handles your application, then, may or may not have been trained in the areas in which you've immersed yourself the past few years of your life. In fact, he or she may be armed only with a list of categories under which to sort the deluge of applicants for multiple advertised positions. The sorting rubric may be as simple as "arrived before deadline" or "meets minimum degree requirements," but institutions which have multiple sites and multiple positions open may establish a particular search committee for each opening. In this case (as in one large West Coast school) an office staffperson may have to decide which committee(s) should see a particular application. Thus, make sure your training, experience, and desired position are easy to find and stated in the terms of the position announcement. Having your packet placed in the wrong stack means at the very least a delay in getting it reviewed properly, a delay during which lines may well have already been drawn concerning which candidates to include on the "interview" list.

If you apply to an institution that requires a standardized application form along with the CV and the application letter, don't neglect to complete it fully. The departmental secretary, or the Human Resources Office, may use this form instead of your CV or letter to determine who next sees your packet. An Administrative Assistant

may check certain institution-specific blocks of information, perhaps even counting the number of credit hours, graduate composition courses, or writing classes taught, to determine your baseline eligibility for the position advertised. Unclear or misread information could get you sorted into the "equivalency" stack--explaining your degree status--or even in the "incomplete application" stack. Be sure this form is neat, accurate, and that it repeats the information provided on your CV.

In addition, note that degree status and other positioning labels may be institution-specific. In mock application reviews I performed last year, Search Committees questioned the use of terms as common as "ABD" and "Candidate in Philosophy." Although both meant the same thing at the applicant's degree-granting institution, they caused confusion and even suspicion with some reviewers as to whether or not (s)he had finished the required coursework. The way your specialization gets coded on transcripts and degrees may also provide a stumbling block. For example, one two-year college I queried sorts its applicants for Writing Instructor into three categories: those who have specialized in composition, those who have taken graduate composition classes, and--"also applied." If your graduate institution labels all specializations "English" or "Literature," or if you have a related degree in, say, linguistics or education, you'll need to make sure that your application shows just how you've proven yourself effective at teaching composition.

On another front, terms used in the position announcements, themselves, may not be as clear as they seem. "Developmental English," for instance, may target students with learning differences, underprepared high school graduates, and/or non-native speakers, depending on the student population and educational mission of a given institution. It may emphasize or lament the five-paragraph essay; final essays may or may not be graded holistically. The department may want a composition generalist or a reading specialist. Be sure you know what you're applying for.

Most two-year colleges interview some ten candidates out of the hundred-plus applications they receive for each position, and travel and accommodation expenses are almost always paid for by the candidates, themselves. Among the colleges I surveyed, the application packet, rather than a face-to-face MLA-style interview, determines whether or not an applicant will be invited for an on-campus interview. Thus, your "paper personality" is quite important. Your application materials should clearly show why a particular campus, student population, and faculty would be a good match for your training and experience. A brief, one to two line summary linking you and the job description should appear early in your CV and/or application letter. Set up your CV in easily readable chunks. Many business theorists recommend a "bullet" list highlighting the specific, on-the-job practices and accomplishments that show how your graduate work experience fits the requirements of your potential employer.

The application letter shouldn't merely summarize your CV. The letter is the place to expand on the CV's pithy lists, to explain connections, and to talk about the aptitudes and insights you gained from your experience as a graduate student and instructor. Bring out any administrative or community service aspects of your graduate experience--curriculum development, organization of orientation sessions, TA training or mentoring--as well as "pure" research and pedagogical preferences. If you have experience that prepares you for the job, but doesn't easily fit the CV format, the application letter can draw attention to it and demonstrate how it strengthens your other areas of expertise. The application letter is also the place to request accommodations such as a translator or wheelchair access.

Finally, remember that search committees read a plethora of applications for each position. While they need to hear that you taught 17 sections of composition emphasizing writing across the curriculum, they want to hear what makes you different from all the other applicants with the same experience. What innovative ways did you use to promote classroom interdisciplinarity? Did you gain experience with computer-assisted instruction or with "at-risk" students *while* you were teaching those 17 composition sections? This is the place to show how you invested the standardized activities expected of all graduate students with your own personal flair. A word of caution, however: at least two department chairs I surveyed considered long-winded letters (more than two pages) an indication of hubris.

Many of the colleges I surveyed predicted that, over the next three to five years, career faculty retirements would increase the number of job openings at the two-year college level. The current market, however, tends to be demoralizing. While the tips I've shared here and the following suggested readings won't, of course, ensure that you get the job, they may help you "compose yourself" more legibly in today's highly competitive job market.

Summary:

TIP 1: Make sure your CV and application letter indicate clearly how your specialization and experience fits the job description. Addenda and qualifiers can be added after you've established your eligibility for the position.

TIP 2: Arrange your application materials in logical, easy-to-read blocks of information. Make each document work for you; redundancy wastes space you could use to demonstrate your compatibility with the institution and the position.

TIP 3: Clarify your terms and the terms of the position announcement. "I have finished my coursework and am presently completing my dissertation" or "I have taught composition to non-native writers for the past three years."

TIP 4: Go beyond simply recounting your present job description in order to show your individual, one-of-a-kind contributions to each position listed in your resume.

SUGGESTED FOR FURTHER READING

Allen, Jeffrey G. Jeff Allen's Best: The Resume. New York: Wiley, 1990.

Marcus, John J. The Complete Job Interview Handbook. New York: HarperCollins Publishing, Inc., 1994.

Weinstein, Bob. Résumés Don't Get Jobs: The Realities and Myths of Job Hunting. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993.